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S E C R E T SECTION 01 OF 03 BEIRUT 000726

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 05/18/2018

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SUBJECT: LEBANON: DRUZE MAYOR RECOUNTS FIGHTING HIZBALLAH
IN ALEY

REF: BEIRUT 641

Classified By: Charge d'Affaires a.i. Michele J. Sison for reasons 1.4
(b) and (d).

SUMMARY

¶1. (C) The Druze Mayor of Aley, Wajdi Mrad, recounted the recent fighting between his fighters (allied with Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party) and Hizballah. Mrad, who suffered a bullet ricochet himself, told us that many of his townsmen were ready to fight the "intruders" in the mountains, but that he worked to make sure the conflict did not escalate significantly. He described the weapons used against the Druze, which are also used by the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), implying that the LAF may have been working in coordination with Hizballah. Both the LAF and Hizballah are still deployed in Aley.

¶2. (C) Mrad assured us that no Druze fought Druze during the clashes, noting that Jumblatt's Druze rival Talal Arslan is "like family" and had visited him the previous day. He requested development assistance from the U.S. for his municipality, and, after a pro-Syrian Syrian Socialist National Party (SSNP) council member left the room, he asked for U.S. naval gunfire assistance against Hizballah. End summary.

HIZBALLAH FIGHTERS
SPOTTED AT THE OUTSET

¶3. (C) On May 18, the Charge, accompanied by DATT and EmbOffs, met with the Druze Mayor of Aley, Wajdi Mrad, and some of his municipal council members in his office in Aley. Aley was one of the fighting grounds during the May 7-15 round of clashes between the opposition and the majority (reftel). An upset Mayor Mrad, member of Walid Jumblatt's Progressive Socialist Party (PSP), reported that one of his citizens had spotted a gunman at 0200 one night during the first week of fighting. He told us that he immediately got into his car to investigate. Upon reaching several black-clothed, armed men (whom he deduced at once were Hizballah fighters), the mayor asked to speak to the person in charge. Aiming guns at his head, they demanded to know

who the mayor was, leading the mayor to conclude that they were not Alei residents.

14. (C) After his release, the mayor reported the incident to the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), which investigated the situation but "did nothing." The next day, Mrad looked for the gunmen but they were not to be found. Mrad said he saw them another time, and again inquired about their identity, to which the gunmen responded, "military intelligence," which based on their black attire, led Mrad to believe them to be Hizballah. In an attempt to calm the situation, Mrad did not publicize seeing the gunmen as it would possibly affect the local tourism industry. (Note: Alei is a major tourism destination for the Lebanese. It was one of the most important tourism centers before the 1975-1990 civil war. End note.)

15. (C) Mrad recounted another run-in between an Alei resident and gunmen who had set up checkpoints along the road and were asking for papers (NFI). These gunmen identified themselves to the resident as Hizballah, and told him that he could no longer use that particular road. Another sighting Mrad relayed was a group of men pretending to drink beer casually, but upon closer inspection by the LAF, the men were holding empty bottles and appeared to be Hizballah. Mayor Mrad reported that they traveled in convoys of black vehicles and used the cars to move people around. He also said that the gunmen kidnapped four policemen during the two weeks of clashes (NFI).

16. (C) Mrad told us that on May 9, when the clashes were

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winding down, he went to investigate a gun shot he heard. While looking into the matter, Mrad himself was shot at and hit in the back by a ricocheting bullet. (Note: At the end of the meeting with the Charge, he stood up and pulled up his shirt to show us his wound. We were able to convince him he did not need to peel off the bandage. End note.)

17. (C) Mrad said that everyone in Alei got hold of "the arms that we keep underground," but he cautioned them against retaliating. In total, he said his Druze fighters killed 13 Hizballah fighters, and let some of them go so as to not let the situation get out of hand. Nevertheless, he said, "I hate Hizballah."

"DRUZE DON'T FIGHT DRUZE"

18. (C) Mrad assured us that no Druze had fought Druze (contrary to previous reports), meaning Jumblatt's PSP supporters did not fight against Druze rival and former minister Talal Arslan's supporters. "We are family," Mrad said of Arslan and his supporters. (Note: Arslan visited Mrad the previous day. End note.) He added that Arslan's men fought alongside PSP, against Hizballah during the last two weeks of clashes. Wiam Wahhab, the third of the main Druze leaders and allied with Hizballah, "does not exist here," according to Mrad. (Note: Charge will see Arslan later this week. End note.)

WHY ALEY?

19. (C) Mrad said he did not understand why Hizballah brought the fight to Alei, a town composed of 80 percent Druze and 20 percent Christians. "We are a tourist town," he explained, "and we are all friends in the mountains. I don't know why (the fighting) happened here, but I know it was not because of our people." He continued, "We provided shelter, food, and other resources to Shia (who came to Alei from the south) during the July 2006 war. Why would Hizballah turn against the Druze and Alei?"

10. (C) He predicted that at some point, Hizballah will lose

because it focuses on "winning" rather than cultivating relationships. Mrad conceded that Hizballah may have been able to successfully court the Druze if it had put effort into building a relationship, but now, he said, there is no way.

SPECULATIONS ON THE LAF

¶11. (C) "The LAF did not do a good job," Mrad asserted. He also expressed his disappointment that the U.S. did not do more. He noted that the LAF is still deployed in Aley, although he also believes Hizballah is also still in Aley, taking shelter in partially-constructed buildings.

¶12. (C) Mrad told us (after asking his councilmen to leave the room) that his PSP fighters were fired upon by three ZU 23's, one mounted on top of an M-113 armored personnel carrier and the other two mounted in trucks. The Druze were also engaged by at least one 106 mm recoilless rifle. (Note: Both of these weapon systems are also used by the LAF. End note.)

HOW THE USG CAN ASSIST: USAID PROJECTS AND NAVAL GUNFIRE

¶13. (C) The mayor said that in an attempt to calm the situation down, he had appealed to schoolchildren and their teachers to focus on school and not the conflict. (Note: Classes in Aley schools were canceled for a week while the fighting continued. End note.) He told us that an unnamed envoy (from Saad Hariri, he later revealed) asked Mrad if he needed money for reparations. Mrad said he declined the

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offer, saying to us that he wants development projects in Aley, such as a waste water facility.

¶14. (C) Mrad, who told us he was on the receiving end of U.S. naval gunfire from the U.S.S. New Jersey in 1983, asked that the U.S. provide naval gunfire support against Hizballah in the Chouf. (Note: Mrad recommended that "the fuses be set a little shorter this time" as most of the U.S.S. New Jersey rounds burrowed into the earth with little effect. End note.) Informing us of the Druze's weapons caches tucked away throughout the Chouf, Mrad said that they needed ammunition.

AN UNWELCOME VISITOR

¶15. (S) Mrad asked for a few minutes alone with the Charge, and the other meeting participants left the room. Mrad confided that one of the municipal council members, Bady Khoury, a Christian who sits on Aley's municipality council, had not been invited to the meeting but had turned up anyway. Mrad said he is from the pro-Syrian SSNP and reports to Hizballah. While Mrad had not mentioned the meeting to anyone other than to agree to the time and date to EmbOff on the telephone, Mrad suspected that Khoury was directed to attend this meeting to listen. Mrad also told us that Arslan knew of the specific timing and participants for today's meeting.
SISON